

Archivists, Social Activism, and Professional Ethics

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Abstract: Since the 1970s, archivists have become increasingly interested in social justice. However, there has been little research into what our profession and our professional lives gain – and what we lose – when we become activists. In late 2010, we surveyed 78 archivists who identified themselves as activists about the relationship between their work and their activism. The respondents believe their activism provides clear benefits to repositories, while activist groups also benefit from the professional work of their archivist members. Those surveyed reported negative repercussions ranging from being made fun of to being fired. Many feel inhibited by their employer from participating in activism. At the same time, some reported that their activism affected their professional duties. The results of this survey suggest that employees need to educate their employers about the benefits of activism. Employers may need to develop guidelines to support activism among their staffs and to minimize the potentially limiting influence on professional activities. Professional organizations, such as the Society of American Archivists, could assist by using codes of ethics or professional standards to encourage the protection of intellectual freedom and the right of archivists to be activists. We examined the codes of related professional organizations that could serve as a model.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, archivists and historians have become increasingly interested in social justice. However, there has been little research into what our professions and our professional lives gain –and what we lose – when we become activists. How does the activism of archivists benefit or hurt the archivists themselves as well as their employers? What effect does the participation of archivists have on activist organizations? While we were interested in these questions because of our participation in the Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) project, we wanted to examine all areas of activism, not just civil rights and social justice.

Methodology

To determine the relationship between work and activism, we decided to ask the activists themselves through an online survey. The survey included questions on employment, activities, the effects of activism and activist organizations on work, and the effects of work on activism and activist organizations. In October and November 2010, through announcements on various historian, archivist, and museum listservs, we invited historians or archivists who identified themselves as activists to fill out the survey. The result was a non-random group of 195 respondents who were archivists, educators



(primarily history professors), or other types of historians. This article deals only with the results from the 78 archivists who responded.

Results

The survey results provide us with a snapshot of archivists who are also activists and how their work and activism intertwine. The 78 archivists who responded represent a range of interests. Half (50%) work at universities, both public and private, while a quarter (24%) work for governments (excluding public universities) and the remainder for other non- and for-profit organizations. They represent all ages from under 30 to over 70, with the most common ages for respondents being 30-39 (32%) and 50-59 (26%). They are active in a variety of causes. The most common areas of activism are gender/sexuality issues (40%) and politics (37%), with the least common being religion (12%) and animal rights (8%).

As seen in table 1, archivists share their professional expertise in many ways with the activist organizations in which they participate. They encourage the retention of organizational records (80%) or their deposit in archival repositories (68%). More than half (54%) report collecting archival materials for their activist organizations. Other work-related activities in which the archivists engage on behalf of their activist organizations include creating exhibits or displays (32%), recording oral history interviews (26%), and digitizing photographs or archival records (22%).

Table 1. Professional activities of archivists on behalf of their activist organizations

Activities	Number (N=76)	%
Encourage preservation/retention of records	61	80.3
Encourage deposit of records	50	65.8
Collect archival materials	41	53.9
Write articles for local publications	31	40.8
Lead workshops, seminars, or classes	30	39.5
Write articles for professional publications	25	32.9
Create exhibits/displays	24	31.6
Organize meetings of historians/archivists	21	27.6
Record oral history interviews	20	26.3
Digitize photos/records	17	22.4
Create videos/AV	8	10.5

As table 2 indicates, the majority of respondents believe their activism provides clear benefits to the institutions that employ them as well as to their activist organizations. Their activism helps advance their employers' institutional mission (71% of respondents) and garner good publicity (63%). Their employers also benefit from the new connections the activists make with others, such as the media, members of the community, or other organizations (57%). Biographies of some politically active historians and archivists describe similar benefits to employers, lending credence to this finding.¹

Table 2. Benefits for employers and activist organizations of archivists' activism

Benefits for Employers	Number (N=49)	%
Advanced mission	35	71.4
Good publicity	31	63.3
New connections	28	57.1
Benefited financially	9	18.4
Helped recruitment	6	12.2
Benefits for Activist Organizations	Number (N=46)	%
Good publicity	30	65.2
New connections	27	58.7
Advanced mission	15	32.6
Helped recruit	10	21.7
Benefited financially	2	4.3

It is not only employers who benefit from archivists becoming activists. According to the respondents, the activist groups in which they participate also benefit from their professional work. The benefits are similar to those experienced by employers, with good publicity (65%) and new connections (58%) topping the list.

The activists themselves experience positive consequences in both the workplace and the activist organization, as seen in table 3. Some 77% of respondents noted that their employers recognized them in newsletters or in other ways for their activism, with 27% of the employers providing financial or in-kind support. Indeed, 16% believe their activism contributed to their getting promotions at work. Some 57% of the activists believe their work strengthened their relationship with their activist organization, with

¹ Elizabeth T. Hurren, "A Radical Historian's Pursuit of Rural History," *The Political Career and Contribution of Reverend Dr. John Charles Cox, c. 1844 to 1919*, *Rural History: Economy, Society, Culture* 19, no. 1 (2008): 81-103; Dione Miles, "Agnes Inglis: The Anarchist Librarian" (lecture, "Thunder in the Midwest: Anarchism in America's Heartland" symposium, Macalester College, St. Paul, Minn., 18-19 January 1980), CD and LP recording, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Ellen D. Swain, "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century," *American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (2003): 139-158; Janet Wells Greene, "The Making of a 'Practical Radical': An Interview with Debra E. Bernhardt," *Radical History Review* 81 (2001): 136-152.

22% being chosen for leadership roles or being featured in publicity because of their professional positions.

Table 3. Effects of activism on activists

Effects of Activism on Relationship with Employer	Number (N=44)	%
Positive Effects		
Recognized positively in workplace	34	77.3
Employer has become a supporter of activist organization	12	27.3
Promoted	7	15.9
Negative effects		
Advancement stalled	4	9.1
Punished in small ways	3	6.8
Demoted	2	4.5
Punished in major ways	1	2.3
Fired	1	2.3
Effects of Archivists' Work on Relationship with Activist Organization		
Strengthened	29	56.7
Chosen for leadership	11	21.6
Contributed to being featured in publicity	11	21.6

Despite the benefits to employers, the archivists described some negative effects of their activism. Of the respondents, 7% noted minor negative effects, such as being made fun of in the workplace. But others noted major repercussions, particularly two archivists who reported being demoted and one being fired because of their activism. Significantly, 25% felt a little inhibited and 16% felt somewhat to completely inhibited by their employers from continuing their activism. Conversely, 8% felt a little inhibited and 7% felt somewhat to completely inhibited by their activist organizations from participating in some work-related duties.

Findings

What do these survey results mean for archivists and their employers? How can we reduce the risks of activism while maximizing its potential benefits? On an individual basis, activist archivists need to educate their employers about the benefits of their

activism and, if necessary, educate their activist organizations about the benefits of their professional work. At the same time, employers may want to develop clear guidelines to support activism among their staffs and minimize risks.

We believe professional organizations such as the Society of American Archivists (SAA) also have a significant role to play. Newsletters and other publications could highlight cases where an archivist's social activism benefited the employer. Additionally, our professional ethics standards could be a vehicle for acknowledging the benefits and risks of activism while setting expectations and providing appropriate guidelines for employers and employees. The remainder of this article focuses on professional standards.

In looking for a model that archival organizations could follow, we examined statements of ethics and professional standards not only from the Society of American Archivists but from allied professions. The standards we looked at included statements from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Historical Association (AHA), and the American Library Association (ALA), as well as the code of ethics for historians proposed by Antoon De Baets in his recent book, *Responsible History*. Specifically, we wanted to determine if they:

- Support social activism of employees as beneficial to institutions
- Protect employers from negative consequences of employee activism
- Protect employees' intellectual freedom in activism

All the codes share a clear expectation that professionals will behave impartially in their work, regardless of their personal beliefs or interests. The ALA's Code of Ethics, for instance, states that, "We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources."² The SAA's Code of Ethics for Archivists stipulates that "Archivists ... should not allow personal beliefs or perspectives to affect their decisions."³ For our purposes, these statements serve to protect employers from potentially negative consequences of employee activism.

The professional organizations' codes are less consistent when it comes to the benefits of activism and to intellectual freedom. The Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics of the AASLH counsels employees, volunteers, and board members to avoid conflicts of interests that might benefit themselves or other organizations. Most significantly, it addresses the social responsibility of historical organizations to "ensure that the breadth of American cultural experiences and perspectives is represented accurately in all programmatic, staffing and operational activities" and calls on them to "provide leadership to the field in becoming representative of our diverse society through equity in staffing, training, collecting, programming and marketing." However, although the AASLH demands intellectual freedom for historical scholarship and interpretation, it

² American Library Association, "Code of Ethics," amended 22 January 2008, accessed 31 October 2011, <http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics.cfm>.

³ Society of American Archivists, "Code of Ethics for Archivists," adopted February 2005, accessed 20 October 2011, <http://www2.archivists.org/standards/code-of-ethics-for-archivists>.

does not address the rights of employees to be activists or to enjoy intellectual freedom in their non-work pursuits.⁴

Like the AASLH Statement, Antoon De Baets' proposed "Code of Ethics for Historians" addresses professional social responsibility. It actually calls on historians to be activists, at least in a limited way, stating that historians "shall work for the rights of all members of the profession worldwide. They shall show solidarity with colleagues and history students whose rights are violated." Although the code promotes intellectual freedom, it confines it to the academic sphere.⁵

The ALA's Code of Ethics, while emphasizing intellectual freedom for patrons, includes only a general statement of support for "conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions."⁶ An ancillary document, "Questions & Answers on Speech in the Workplace," states that librarians have "a special responsibility to create a workplace that tolerates employee expression more than other professions." However, this again relates to on-the-job intellectual freedom, not protection for off-the-job activism.⁷

The two organizations that deal largely with academics, the AHA and the AAUP, provide the clearest statements that employees' right to activism should be protected. The AHA's "Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct" focuses on academic freedom in issues of historical interpretation and recognizes the benefits of historians' involvement in the community, noting that "interpreting the past is . . . vital to democratic debate and civic life in the public realm." Its policy calls for a balanced approach that protects the institution and the professional. Specifically, it states, "Historians should not be subject to institutional or professional penalties for their beliefs and activities, provided they do not misrepresent themselves as speaking for their institutions or their professional organizations when they are not authorized to do so."⁸

The AAUP in its "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure" calls for clear protection of employees' activism. "College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline."⁹ AAUP's more recent policy statement, "Ensuring Academic Freedom in Politically Controversial Academic Personnel Decisions," discusses the need for academic freedom protection of all academic staff, including librarians, inside and outside of the classroom.¹⁰

⁴ American Association for State and Local History, "Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics," adopted June 2002, accessed 20 October 2011, <http://www.aaslh.org/ethics.htm>.

⁵ Antoon De Baets, "A Code of Ethics for Historians (proposal)," in Antoon De Baets, *Responsible History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), accessed 20 October 2011, http://www.concernedhistorians.org/content_files/file/et/148.pdf.

⁶ ALA Code of Ethics.

⁷ "Questions & Answers on Speech in the Workplace," Amended 24 January 2007, accessed 31 October 2011, <http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/qa-speechworkplace.cfm>.

⁸ American Historical Association, "Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct," updated 8 June 2011, accessed 13 October 2011, <http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/ProfessionalStandards.cfm>.

⁹ American Association of University Professors, "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," accessed 23 October 2011, <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/1940statement.htm#b2>.

¹⁰ American Association of University Professors, Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure, "Ensuring Academic Freedom in Politically Controversial Academic Personnel Decisions," *Bulletin of the AAUP* 97 (September 2011): 88-115, accessed 23 October 2011, <http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/895B2C30-29F6-4A88-80B9-FCC4D23CF28B/0/PoliticallyControversialDecisionsreport.pdf>.

Conclusion

The results of our survey show that activism by archivists has a positive effect on repositories, activist organizations, and the archivists' professional lives. However, when archivists are politically active, they put their professional lives at risk. To a lesser extent, they impose some risk on their institutions.

Codes of ethics or standards by professional organizations are one way of ameliorating the risks for activists while acknowledging the benefits of their activism. For archivists in the United States, the logical organization to undertake this is the SAA. Currently, the SAA's code of ethics asks archivists to refrain from allowing their personal beliefs to affect their decisions but does not state the benefits of activism or call for intellectual freedom for archivists. The ethics policies of related professional organizations, reviewed here, provide possible models for the SAA. The AHA acknowledges that community activism of employees is beneficial to institutions. Both the AHA and the AAUP call for protection of employees' intellectual freedom and activism. The SAA could benefit the many activist archivists by adopting similar statements.

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